

The Pleasures of Reading Stephen King

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Mr. Mercedes

by Stephen King

Scribner, 437 pp., \$30.00

Finders Keepers

by Stephen King

Scribner, 434 pp., \$30.00

End of Watch

by Stephen King

Scribner, 432 pp., \$30.00

Is it right for a single mother spending a cold night outside so as to be among the first for a job handout at her town's government center to bring her croupy baby along with her? Isn't that irresponsible? But what if she can't find anyone to babysit, and couldn't afford to pay anyway? Sometime in the early hours, trapped in a long line that winds through a maze of yellow tape, a man offers her his sleeping bag; she can get inside with the baby and change its sodden diaper. "Why are you being so kind to us?" she asks. "Because we're here," he says.

In thick fog, with financial crisis turning into recession, the man is thinking *Grapes of Wrath*, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl; the woman is worrying out loud about exposing her child to the cold. "I want to apologize to everyone, for everything," she says. Shortly after dawn, in a few seconds of bewilderment and terror, their lives are wiped out by a big Mercedes driven at speed right into the point where the crowd is thickest. The car disappears, leaving eight dead and fifteen seriously injured.

So *Mr. Mercedes* opens with the archetypal Stephen King confrontation: on the one hand ordinary folk struggling to make it in a difficult world, willing to lend one another a helping hand, always ready to feel guilty when their needs and desires prompt them to behave selfishly; on the other, pure, destructive evil; not, in this case, some extraterrestrial or demonic creature, as is normally the way in King's novels, just a man so resentful of his failure to climb quickly to the top that he has chosen to treat life as an ugly game. The ordinary people are eager to be winners, but not at the cost of their humanity; the evil loner has no such scruples; putting winning before everything else, he actually alters the sense of what it means to win: for him it is simply a question of how many other people he can destroy.

But what if, instead of driving cars into crowds, or blowing people up, or poisoning and shooting them—all of which he will do at some point—our evil enemy were to learn to play on the vulnerabilities of the better folk, inducing them to feel so badly about their own strivings and shortcomings that they kill themselves? Wouldn't that be altogether more satisfying? Wouldn't it show the superiority of nihilism to an ingenuous belief in life? This is the "refinement" Stephen King introduces into his Bill Hodges Trilogy—*Mr. Mercedes*, *Finders Keepers*, *End of Watch*—Hodges being the elderly police detective who, having failed to solve the Mercedes case when in service, takes it on a year later in his retirement. Depressed and disappointed despite a brilliant career, alienated from his ex-wife and in only occasional contact with his daughter and grandchildren, forever caressing his father's old .38 Smith & Wesson M&P revolver and sometimes even slipping it into his mouth, Hodges receives a long letter from "the one that got away" that immediately presents itself as a challenge. "Retired police have an *extremely high suicide rate!!*" the Mercedes killer reminds him after a long description of the pleasure he took crunching the big car over broken bodies, and finishes with "one final thought...:FUCK YOU, LOSER."



Steve Schofield/Contour by Getty Images

Stephen King, Bangor, Maine, August 2013

So the battle begins. Or the game. Hodges is equipped with two guns, an expired policeman's ID, and his Happy Slapper, "an argyle sock. The foot part is filled with ball bearings." Life ought to be about helping each other in the general struggle for survival; instead this rogue element forces us into a contest; things can only return to normal when it is over.

If Mr. Mercedes is hidden from Hodges, he is soon introduced to the reader. We will be allowed to know just how evil the enemy is, how dangerous the crimes he is planning, so that we can feel more anxious about our hero's initially ineffectual attempts to find and stop him. We would like to tell Hodges what he needs to do, where he ought to look, but we can't. Like fans at a football game, we watch from the sidelines, hopping up and down as others do battle.

Unsurprisingly, our monster is largely his mother's fault. Brady Hartsfield and his younger brother Frankie were brought up by their alcoholic mother following their father's accidental death. After Frankie suffered brain damage in a near-suffocation episode, Brady and his mom found the disabled boy too much of an effort and eventually connived in the accident that saw him break his neck on the stairs. After which mother and son got into a relationship that Brady describes as a "gothic rainbow of a secret." Without a man, she flashes her once-pretty body at her "honeyboy"; having never had a girl, he allows her to jerk him off.

An avid reader and computer genius—"a shitbag, but a bright, book-reading shitbag," as Hodges easily guesses—Brady, now twenty-eight, works for Discount Electronix, fixes people's laptops in their homes for Cyber Control, and serves ice cream in a Mr. Tastey truck. He is unobtrusive suburban evil, able to get into people's houses and lives and observe what his enemies are up to without being observed himself. His own home is full of dirty dishes, stale food, and the debris of his mother's drinking. He eats TV meals from the freezer. In the basement his seven computers turn on when he pronounces the word "chaos" and self-destruct after twenty seconds if he doesn't pronounce the word "darkness." His psychology is all dastardly calculation, denigration, and exaggerated emotional reaction to small successes and failures. A cartoon extremity clings to all he does and the language he uses. "Little piggy, oink-oink-oink," he thinks when he sees a chubby girl. "You're so fat your cunt probably turns inside out when you sit down." Then more portentously, thinking of Nietzsche, "I am the abyss."

In the best crime-fiction tradition, Hodges does not take the killer's letter to the police; nor does he show them the evidence he soon uncovers that the owner of the stolen Mercedes used for the government center massacre didn't simply kill herself some months later, but was actually induced to do so. By the monster? The retired policeman has his old contacts in the force, but exploits rather than informs them—they wouldn't be imaginative enough to solve this crime—then feels guilty in the same way one might feel guilty about bringing a baby to spend the night in the cold. The truth is that the contest with Mr. Mercedes has given Hodges something to live for; it has saved him from suicide rather than pushed him toward it. In general, throughout this trilogy, guilty feelings never prevent King's characters from doing what they want; rather they reassure the reader that he or she possesses a moral conscience, is one of us. Naturally, the failure to disclose evidence raises the stakes: if Hodges doesn't catch Mr. Mercedes before his next massacre, he will be partly responsible for whatever happens.

Floundering, Hodges gathers various collaborators around him. First Jerome, the seventeen-year-old who cuts his lawn for pocket money. Much is made of the fact that Jerome is both black and very smart, Harvard-bound in fact, and hails from a model middle-class family, his younger sister being "your basic good kid... who helps old ladies across the street." Despite this, Jerome never fails to show off his alter ego, Tyrone Feelgood Delight, a poor black of bygone days: "*You* is Sherlock! I is Doctah Watson!" he tells Hodges, irritating the policeman and the reader even more, since the intention is evidently to underline how far from the old, negative black-white relationship this affectionate partnership is. "Nigger lawnboy" and "Harvard jungle bunny" are Brady's names for Jerome, in case we missed the point.

Questioning the dead Mercedes owner's beautiful sister, Janelle, Hodges falls in love with her and she with him, beginning a relationship that infuriates Brady, who is obliged to see himself as a sexual loser and the overweight, sixty-two-year-old Hodges as an unexpected winner. However, any helper of Hodges is immediately at risk. We have to fear for Jerome, his sister, and their charming Irish setter, all in Brady's menacing sights as he serves ice cream. In the event, it is Janelle who, thanks to a remarkable series of coincidences, is blown to bits instead of Hodges while driving his car away from her mother's funeral. Hodges is distraught and afflicted with guilt—"If I'd used my father's gun two weeks ago [to kill myself], she'd be alive"—but by now the reader has learned not to worry that this might be a serious issue for the hero. He'll be over it in a page or two and actually it is something of a relief to have our detective returned to his long-suffering, lonely state, saved from a lover whom King was careful to present as unpromisingly bossy.

These melodramatic events mark the beginning of Hodges's relationship with his most important and idiosyncratic collaborator, the one who will dominate the rest of the trilogy and become the ex-policeman's partner in the private detective agency, Finders Keepers, that gives the second book its title. An Asperger's sufferer in her early forties, survivor of two suicide attempts, and utterly dominated by a suffocating mother, Holly Gibney, Janelle's cousin, has hidden strengths and talents. "Jerome is good with computers," Hodges observes, "but Holly plays the keyboard like a Steinway." As we know, it is computer competence that enables a criminal to commit crimes these days and ordinary members of the public to catch them before the police. We compete through computers. Holly, a loser in every other department, is a winner with laptop and tablet.

It is hard at this point not to think of another Asperger's-challenged, crime-solving computer genius, Lisbeth Salander, in Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. But while the anorexic Lisbeth could be unspeakably vindictive and sexually predatory, the infantile, overweight Holly shrinks from all physical contact and never utters anything stronger than "fracking poop." Holly is the perfect addition to a happy family of good detectives ("Jerome really is a good person," thinks Hodges) that now spans three generations, bridges ethnic and gender divides, and embraces a certain degree of handicap. It will be Holly who, in the confusion of a rock concert at which Jerome's pretty sister is vulnerably present, eventually prevents Brady from blowing himself and hundreds of others to bits by whacking him over the head with Hodges's Happy Slapper.

"You have to admire a man," wrote John Leonard reviewing Stephen King in these pages in 2002, who treats "scaring the bejesus out of us" as if it were "a domestic art." But is King really scary? Not in this trilogy. Not for me. And I'm hardly immune from being scared by fiction. Reading Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* I remember as a terrifying experience. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* was another book that made me extremely anxious. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Per Petterson's *Siberia*, and Peter Stamm's short stories have all had me extremely fearful for the well-being of their characters.

Bringing in literary heavyweights might seem inappropriate, yet King has been awarded the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and peppers the pages of his writing with literary references. Aside from Nietzsche, this trilogy mentions or alludes to Philip Roth, Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Wilfred Owen, Tobias Wolff, Robert Louis Stevenson, Steinbeck, Vonnegut, Flannery O'Connor, and many others. Why? Is King suggesting that he moves in the same world, or does he aim, simply by mixing these names with those of any number of popular heroes, TV shows, and rock bands, to remind us that culture is a very broad church? We can enjoy it all.

In any event, a moment's reflection on our emotional response to these different authors immediately reaffirms the distance between genre writing and literature. One is anxious reading *Jude the Obscure*, or *Disgrace*, because one quickly senses that the authors are so intensely engaged in following through their characters' dilemmas and predicaments that they would not hesitate to have things end badly if that is where their genius leads. There is no easy division into good and evil and no feeling that order need necessarily be returned to the world in the closing pages.

Quite the opposite is the case with King, whose persuasive openings are quickly drained of their power by the all too evident mechanisms of genre. How many times has he written the scene where a character we supposed had been killed wakes up again? Or where our hero doesn't notice that he is being watched? Or where he or she is physically challenged but nevertheless overcomes endless obstacles to save the day at the last moment?

Rhetorically, all is portentous and emphatic—"it's always darkest before the dawn"; "payback is a bitch, and the bitch is back"—but the sheer repetition of familiar tropes prevents any real intensity from building up. From the moment we appreciate that only minor figures will be dispatched, we are at ease. "Blood and brains fly in a fan and decorate the doorframe with gaud," we are told, but if they are not the blood and brains of someone who matters we are unimpressed.

Yet King's success and popularity are beyond question. He is one of the most widely translated authors the world over, reputed to have sold more than 350 million books. So what is it exactly that people are enjoying? Could it be that King is deliberately preventing us from taking his stories too much to heart? It would make perfect sense, after all, for people *not to want* to be genuinely scared by a book, but rather, as it were, to play with being scared. Certainly, I would not return lightly to *Jude the Obscure* and if I think of Simenon, one of the few novelists who have triumphed in both genre and literary fiction, while I admire his *Dirty Snow* as a terrifying study in nihilism (Brady Hartsfield doesn't



Stephen King; drawing by David Levine

come close) it is certainly much easier to settle down with a Maigret, precisely because, at a deep level, with Maigret as with Hodges, nothing much will be allowed to happen. Our hero will remain an indisputably good person; he will not let us down.

Revisiting territory previously explored in *Misery* (1987), *Finders Keepers*, the second of the recent trilogy, appears to take on the gap between literary and genre writing, coming out in favor of the latter. The bloody sequence of events recounted occurs because someone took a serious literary writer too much to heart. The novel's happy resolution comes about when our favorite character acknowledges the difference between literature and reality, and concludes that reality matters more.

The evil Brady Hartsfield is in a hospital recovering from brain damage, but Morris Bellamy is a perfect stand-in for this interim adventure, so villainously similar to Brady in fact that I can't think of a difference worth mentioning. Scorned by his loathsome mother, Bellamy immerses himself in the work of the great writer John Rothstein, drawn to his rebellious hero Jimmy Gold, whose nihilist watchword is "Shit don't mean shit," only to be appalled when Rothstein has Gold "sell out" and accept a middle-class career and family. Rothstein stops publishing fiction and hoards money and notebooks on a secluded farm in New Hampshire, where the disgusted Bellamy tracks him down and kills him. Having also killed his two accomplices, he has just time to return to Hodges's midwestern town and bury the trunk containing his treasure under a tree behind his house before he is arrested for rape and put away for thirty years.

All this in 1978. In 2010, living in what had been Bellamy's house, the thirteen-year-old Pete Saubers finds the trunk. His father was crippled in Brady's government center massacre, and from the consequent frustration at not being able to walk or work seems on the brink of divorcing Pete's querulous mother. Fearing for his family, Pete mails the money anonymously to his parents—\$500 in cash every month for four years—thus turning their marriage around. But there is his younger sister to provide for and the money has now run out. How to get the girl to a good school and good university? There is always a feeling in King's work that a life without middle-class aspirations is hardly a life at all. Pete thinks despairingly that one of his sister's friends is "headed for a rewarding job as a waitress or a drive-thru girl after high school.... If she doesn't get pregnant at sixteen, that is." These concerns push the boy to do something he knows is wrong: try to sell the great Rothstein's notebooks on the black market.

Released on parole, Bellamy comes looking for his loot and the reader is set up for the inevitable showdown between evil and innocence. Meanwhile, the younger sister, seeing her brother in distress (wracked by guilt), informs her friend Barbara, who tells her older brother Jerome, who calls in Bill Hodges, who largely, thanks to Holly's computer skills, saves the day. In the final scene, Bellamy threatens Pete and his sister with a gun while Pete holds a cigarette lighter over Rothstein's fabulously valuable notebooks, which he has drenched in gasoline. Which is more important, life or art? When the books go up in flames, Bellamy grovels among them, driven by his obsession with Rothstein.

The good person, Pete realizes, chooses ordinary life over literature. The reader, however, was never in danger of making the wrong choice. At no point is Rothstein's work presented in such a way as to convince us of its power. The few quotations we are given look remarkably like King's writing, down to the same emphatic and portentous rhythms. In any event, only villains let themselves get tied up with fancy thinkers like Nietzsche and Rothstein; we all know we're safer with a good thriller.

In *End of Watch*, the final work of the trilogy, we're back with Brady Hartsfield, and King, no doubt aware of his stronger suit, returns to the supernatural. Fed experimental drugs by an unscrupulous neurologist, Brady has come out of his coma with special powers. He can get inside other people's minds, especially if they allow themselves to be hypnotized by the Zappit game consoles lying around the hospital. All the while feigning a vegetable state to avoid trial for his crimes, Brady will eventually learn to control minds at a distance through the game console. Making zombies of those around him, he has them buy a huge quantity of the out-of-date consoles and deliver them to young people whom he can then easily induce to suicide. Coming to the rescue, Hodges, Holly, and Jerome are once again obliged to work without the help of the police department, where Hodges's replacement is too interested in her career to risk ridicule pursuing brain-damaged demons with supernatural powers.

At a certain point in *End of Watch*, I became fascinated with the many analogies King uses. Brady's voice "grates like the hinges on a seldom-opened door"; his neurologist moves "like an android in an old sci-fi movie"; Brady thinks of "chaos" and "in his mind, he boomed it out like Moses on Mount Sinai"; lying to Holly about his cancer, Hodges feels "like dogshit on an old shoe"; Holly shreds her salad until it starts "to look like confetti at a leprechaun birthday party"; realizing Hodges's cancer is terminal, she finds imagining "her life with him gone is like standing on top of a skyscraper and looking at the sidewalk sixty stories below"; girls at a rock concert are "as excited as Mexican jumping

beans in a microwave”; a man snores “like a chainsaw on idle”; when a victim whose mind he has invaded jumps to her death, “Brady is blown out of her head like a pilot strapped to an F-111 ejection seat.”

There is a childish energy about all these images, a comic-strip exuberance, that both keeps us reading and excludes our taking the work too seriously. And it is this mood that will bring us to the point that is the real payoff for the reader in these novels; we good folks, who always feel a little guilty when we do something mean, can relish the utter destruction of our utterly evil enemy without any qualms or misgivings. “Look who *wins*, Detective Hodges,” cries a triumphant Brady, who has now taken up permanent residence in the body of his neurologist and has Hodges and Holly at his gun-toting mercy.

But the reader *knows* it is not true. The reader knows that very soon we will be the ones exulting as the villain is crushed into the dirt. Sure enough, in the inevitable melee, Holly, who has never used or held a weapon before and was committed to never doing so, happily fires off a Victory revolver she’s grabbed from the floor. How wonderful guns are when we are firing them at a man who deserves to die, when we can kill without feeling guilty. Game over, Brady.

And back to reality. Hodges’s doomed struggle with pancreatic cancer and Holly’s difficult future after his death are not stories King will write. But an endnote has the author gracefully thanking his researchers and collaborators and reminding us of his two philanthropic ventures, “the Haven Foundation, which helps freelance artists down on their luck, and the King Foundation, which helps schools, libraries, and small-town fire departments.” We are also given the National Suicide Prevention Hotline phone number, just in case. But it’s hardly necessary. The reader closes the book feeling immensely reassured.

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